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Partnering With Pakistan

By Asif Ali Zardari
Wednesday, January 28, 2009; A15

ISLAMABAD -- Pakistan looks forward to a new beginning in its bilateral relationship with the United States. First, we congratulate Barack Obama and the country that had the character to elect him, and we welcome his decision to name a special envoy to Southwest Asia. Appointing the seasoned diplomat Richard Holbrooke says much about the president's worldview and his understanding of the complexities of peace and stability and the threats of extremism and terrorism. Simply put, we must move beyond rhetoric and tackle the hard problems.

Pakistan has repeatedly been identified as the most critical external problem facing the new administration. The situation in Pakistan, Afghanistan and India is indeed critical, but its severity actually presents an opportunity for aggressive and innovative action. Since the end of the Musharraf dictatorship, Pakistan has worked to confront the challenges of a young democracy facing an active insurgency, within the context of an international economic crisis. Ambassador Holbrooke will soon discover that Pakistan is far more than a rhetorical partner in the fight against extremism. Unlike in the 1980s, we are surrogates for no one. With all due respect, we need no lectures on our commitment. This is our war. It is our children and wives who are dying.

Ambassador Holbrooke will encounter a region of interrelated issues crossing borders -- old problems that have been left to fester, new realities in an era of active terrorism, and the residual consequences of past Western support for dictatorships and disregard for economic and social development. Let's delineate them.

For almost 60 years the relationship between Pakistan and America has been based on quid pro quo policies with short-term goals and no long-term strategy. Frankly, the abandonment of Afghanistan and Pakistan after the defeat of the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s set the stage for the era of terrorism that we are enduring. U.S. support for the priorities of dictatorship back then, and again at the start of the new millennium, neglected the social and economic development of our nation, the priorities of the people. We must do better.

President Obama understands that for Pakistan to defeat the extremists, it must be stable. For democracy to succeed, Pakistan must be economically viable. Assistance to Pakistan is not charity; rather, the creation of a politically stable and economically viable Pakistan is in the long-term, strategic interest of the United States.

The Obama administration should immediately encourage Congress to pass the Enhanced Partnership with Pakistan Act. The multiyear, \$1.5 billion annual

commitment to social progress here would signal to our people that this is no longer a relationship of political convenience but, rather, of shared values and goals. Strengthening our democracy and helping us to improve education, housing and health care is the greatest tool we could wield against extremism. Indeed, such policy is the fanatics' worst fear.

The designation of regional opportunity zones to build a viable economy in Northwest Pakistan and in Afghanistan would give residents an economic and political stake in the success of their democratic governments. Legislation introduced last year by Rep. Chris Van Hollen and Sen. Maria Cantwell should be quickly revisited; it would signal to our region that the United States understands the correlation between a healthy economy, a satisfied people and a stable government.

Over the past several months, remarkable progress has been made in our battle against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Measures include repeated airstrikes by our F-16s and targeted ground assaults. We are willing to act to save our nation. To the extent that we are unable to fully execute battle plans, we urge the United States to give us necessary resources -- upgrading our equipment and providing the newest technology -- so that we can fight the terrorists proactively on our terms, not reactively on their terms. Give us the tools, and we will get the job done.

With his experience, Ambassador Holbrooke surely understands that peace in our region can be secured only by addressing long-term and neglected problems. Much as the Palestinian issue remains the core obstacle to peace in the Middle East, the question of Kashmir must be addressed in some meaningful way to bring stability to this region. We hope that the special envoy will work with India and Pakistan not only to bring a just and reasonable resolution to the issues of Kashmir and Jammu but also to address critical economic and environmental concerns.

The water crisis in Pakistan is directly linked to relations with India. Resolution could prevent an environmental catastrophe in South Asia, but failure to do so could fuel the fires of discontent that lead to extremism and terrorism. We applaud the president's desire to engage our nation and India to defuse the tensions between us.

Pakistan and the United States have much in common and should be partners in peace. This moment of crisis is an opportunity to recast our relationship. We are extending our hand in friendship. Indeed, Pakistan's new democracy has pried open the clenched fists of the extremists, to use a metaphor from President Obama's inaugural address. Let it not be said by future generations that our nations missed an extraordinary opportunity to build lasting peace in South Asia.

The writer is president of Pakistan

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